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By - Clay, Suzanne

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Twenty-four members of two poverty areas were chosen to be trained as nonprofessional parent interviewers. They were given the training and then sent to their respective community areas to obtain interviews with the parents of Head Start children. The geographical areas involved were the New England region around Boston and Bolivar County, Mississippi. The purpose of this project was twofold: (1) to obtain parents' attitudes toward the Head Start program attended by their children, and (2) to involve some of the parents in a meaningful and productive role within the Head Start evaluation and research design. It was necessary, for the success of this project, to sustain close cooperation and joint planning between the professional staff and the nonprofessional interviewers. Hiring of the interviewers was based on recommendations of New England Head Start directors who had prior experience working in some phase of the overall research program. Twelve interviewers sampled the New England region, and 12 interviewed Mississippi parents. The resulting interviews have been judged to be, on the whole, very satisfactory. (WD)

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HEAD START EVALUATION AND RESEARCH CENTER

THE UTILIZATION OF NON-PROFESSIONAL INTERVIEWERS
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BY THE BOSTON UNIVERSITY HEAD START EVALUATION
AND RESEARCH PROGRAM, 1966-1967¹

Suzanne Clay

Boston University

ABSTRACT

This report is a description of the steps taken by the Boston University Head Start Evaluation and Research Center in cooperation with participating Head Start programs in 1966-1967 to utilize non-professional interviewers, 24 mothers of Head Starters in the collection of data about 191 samples families in New England and Bolivar County, Mississippi. It includes a discussion of the characteristics of the non-professionals hired, the nature of the training given, and some assessment of their performance in the Evaluation Project.

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- ¹ "The research reported herein was performed pursuant to a contract with the Office of Economic Opportunity, Executive Office of the President, Washington, D.C., 20506. The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and should not be construed as representing the opinions or policy of any agency of the United States Government."

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Suzanne Clay

Boston University

This report presents the highlights of the descriptive material and interviews emergent from the Boston University Head Start Evaluation and Research parent interviewing project conducted among sample families living in the New England area and Bolivar County, Mississippi. This project, developed during the period of March through August 1967, was a part of the national evaluation of Head Start.

Because the project involved the hiring of 24 non-professionals or "community interviewers" who were Head Start mothers with prior experiences working or volunteering in Center activities, it appears that the organizational steps used constitute "research firsts" in several ways and, thus, warrant their reporting. The empirical data represents the responses of 191 parents in the New England and Mississippi samples to a series of questions contained in the Parent Interview.

Organization of the Report

The report is organized into four sections:

- Section I - Development of the Parent Interviewing Project
- Section II - Description of the Training
- Section III - The Mississippi Interviewing Project
- Section IV - An Assessment of What Was Accomplished in the New England and Mississippi Project

Sections I through IV are more descriptive than interpretive, simply because it seems that to get a full picture of the characteristics of the non-professionals hired, the role they played, and some assessment of their performance in the evaluation requires an account of how the project was developed from the outset.

Section III focuses specifically on the procedures employed in Bolivar County, Mississippi, in an attempt to describe some of the unique problems encountered in this area.

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SECTION I - DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARENT INTERVIEWING PROJECT

A major project of the 1966-1967 evaluation of Head Start children in New England and Bolivar County, Mississippi, was the utilization of non-professional community interviewers in the collection of information about the attitudes and reactions of parents during an interview. Our decision to recruit and train community people resulted from requests by several New England Head Start Directors that the Boston University Head Start Evaluation and Research Center make a commitment to involve parents of Head Start children to the fullest extent in meaningful and productive roles within the evaluation and research design. A secondary factor supporting the suggestion was our interest in demonstrating that a team of parents who were knowledgeable about the various communities in which the Head Start evaluation samples were located and who had training in interviewing skills and on-the-job supervision from E&R Center Staff would be able to elicit cooperation and reliable responses from parents of Head Start children.

Accordingly, during the months of March and April 1967 the research associate assigned to develop this phase of the evaluation met with Directors of sample Head Start Centers in New England and requested their assistance in developing a feasible plan of operation. Among the many questions posed were the following: What impact will the activities of teams of community interviewers have upon on-going Head Start programs? Will the parents resent having neighbors in some instances, asking probing questions about their children's behavior at home? Will the parents, many of whom are receiving welfare assistance, be confused about the Head Start evaluation project to the extent that they will identify the community interviewer as an employee of a welfare agency? Will there be avenues of communication built into the project so that professional Head Start social service workers can share in planning methods to be used? What financial arrangements will be made to make this a reasonable task for the community interviewer? Will the position be advertised widely so that the better applicants may be chosen?

Social Workers Seminar

Obviously it was apparent that given the design of utilizing non-professionals in the communities as parent interviewers, the fulfillment of our goal depended upon the close cooperation and joint planning of the E&R staff and personnel in each of the sample centers. Head Start Directors in New England sample centers were asked to appoint two representatives from among their total staff of social service workers, neighborhood case aides, social service directors and chiefs of parent programs, to attend a series of four seminar planning meetings at Boston University during the months of May and June 1967. The focus of the seminar would be to explore many questions that had been raised and to further establish a forum whereby these staffs in the sample Head Start Centers could be apprised more fully of the role of evaluation and research and the progress of the parent interviewing project.

These Spring afternoon meetings proved to be successful in accomplishing our initial goal to plan for recruitment, hiring and supervision of community interviewers. The secondary goal of facilitating new channels of communication between Head Start social service staffs throughout New England was met to a surprising degree. It was observed at these meetings that Head Start personnel who were employed in comparable roles in various communities needed a medium to

exchange ideas as well as to air frustrating experiences in order to assess their own situation in clearer perspective. That personnel in rural communities were unaware of the social blight found in inner city ghettos was apparent. As the group became more knowledgeable about differences between Head Start programs operating in urban city and rural suburban areas and more comfortable in verbalizing experiences, many suggestions for "successful remedies and techniques" in building a strong parent involvement program within Head Start programs were shared.

To facilitate discussion of some of the issues facing poverty workers in the area of social services, the group was shown a film at the third session that focused upon the frustrations, aspirations and fears of America's poor. Tapes of interviews were played back to this group of professional Head Start workers for their reactions.

Qualifications of the Community Interviewers

Specifically, the results that issued from this communication with social service staffs in sample Head Start programs throughout the New England area was the result of joint planning of a design that mapped out what qualifications the community interviewers should have as well as suggestions to E&R regarding topics that should be covered in training sessions. Briefly, the design agreed upon was one involving 12 parents of Head Start children who must have had prior experience working in some phase of the program as a volunteer worker, classroom aide, neighborhood case worker, member of the Head Start policy advisory board or in comparable roles requiring their active participation.

They would be required to attend a series of weekly training and orientation sessions to be held at Boston University throughout a three-month period. Each community interviewer would be paid for attending orientation training sessions, completing satisfactorily assigned parent interviews and personal transportation costs incurred in making visits to homes. Each of the sample Head Start Directors in New England was asked to submit recommendations for the parent representatives to be interviewed for the position of community interviewer within each community. Furthermore, it was agreed that the E&R staff and community interviewers would cooperate closely with Head Start social service staffs in making contacts with those families who were already involved in referral services from the local welfare agencies.

Who Was Hired

By May 1967 we had received the letters of recommendation for 12 mothers from the Boston ABCD, Brockton Self-Help, Incorporated, Hartford Child Development Program and the Cambridge Head Start programs. After screening and approving applicants the E&R training staff conducted a general orientation meeting at Boston University in May, 1967. The mothers had backgrounds that appeared to capture the experiences needed. Two parents had been employed as teacher aides for two years in Cambridge Head Start classes; two were currently serving terms of office as President and First Vice-President of the Hartford Child Development program in addition to sharing with the total group roles as mothers - active and vocal in their local P.T.A.'s and church groups. Although the qualifications sent to Head Start Directors did not state a preference for the better educated, it seemed that their ability to function successfully in community organizations, relevant work experience and alertness to the reactions of others correlated highly

with their ability to function as community interviewers.

One mother was Spanish-speaking, and it was quite apparent that her bilingual ability was an important factor for communicating with Puerto Rican and Portuguese parents. The overall incidence of totally Spanish-speaking parents was small enough throughout the New England sample to be handled by enlisting volunteer services of Spanish-speaking students in local colleges when the need arose.

About one half of the community interviewers expressed the desire to get further education and job training whether this was completion of high school credits or admission in college courses during the evenings and weekends. At least two from this group have become involved, subsequent to their employment as E&R interviewers, as employed workers within an urban recreation poverty project, a job that involves them in working directly with parents and their children. The two former teacher aides have since returned to Head Start classes as aides on either a paid or volunteer basis.

Methods of Publicizing in the Sample Communities

A recommendation made by sample Head Start Centers was that the E&R Center should accept suggestions from the Directors as to how the project should be publicized in the communities. The phase of publicizing the purpose of the parent interview, consequently, was developed according to the methods felt to be the best by the staffs in the sample Centers. For this reason, there was much variation in approaches made to parents from community to community. Particularly at this juncture of the planning an effort was made to carry out the wishes of participating staffs in approaching their parents. The Hartford Child Development Program used a combination of letters to parents from the E&R Project Director and articles in their own newsletter as a vehicle of communication. Another center with a relatively small number of children, the Saint James' Ecumenical Center in Roxbury, Massachusetts, elected to inform their parents via a discussion of the program at one of the weekly parent meetings in the center. The Director of the Cambridge Head Start program felt that their social workers could be very helpful in mentioning E&R involvement in the community during their daily visits to families.

With the exception of the Head Start Center mentioned previously, all of the others supported our wish to mail letters to the sample families before the community interviewers made a first call to homes. The form letter included the purpose of the interview, supplied the parents with a brief statement regarding the background of the interviewer who would be calling in the near future, and introduced the interviewer by name. This technique was evaluated later by both the team of community interviewers and the Head Start Directors as a successful one in building a friendly relationship with individual families.

Finally, contact was made with local police departments and schools in several communities by Head Start Directors to further insure a welcome reception to interviewers as they sought families in public housing developments and apartment buildings. Each interviewer also carried a letter of identification with her to present to the respondent before the interview was begun.

SECTION II - DESCRIPTION OF THE TRAINING

Reviewing the nature of the training sessions, I believe training of non-professionals, with few exceptions, was minimal. The 12 parents in New England received training and supervision over a three-month period in a total of five group meetings and sporadic telephone conversations with the E&R training staff. Two trainers, one an E&R research associate and the other a staff social worker, led the training sessions along the lines of demonstrating how the experiences and problems met by the community interviewers could be handled or resolved to their advantage. Generally, the approach centered around explaining the connection between the E&R design for educational research and the ongoing Head Start programs which the children attended; clarifying to the parent's satisfaction that the interviewer was not a welfare worker seeking to extract highly personal information about the family; and developing interviewing skills among the interviewers so that they could encourage parents to elaborate upon responses or could make probes in a non-offensive manner. The last item was the focus of two of the training sessions in which interviewers elected to role-play specific situations that had challenged their skills, and to discuss how the interviewer should handle the interaction. Several tapes of these sessions were made and proved useful in focusing the group's attention on how they were developing in their ability to interpret the verbal and non-verbal behavior of parents.

Training for the three Hartford community interviewers had to be condensed since they were at great distances from the majority of the community workers located in or around Boston. However, by involving the Chief of Parent Programs from the Hartford Child Development Program (a professional social worker by training as well as a sensitive individual in her relationship with the non-profession) the supervision of these interviewers was also attended to.

Use of "Elastic Group Process"

The key to the training of the community interviewers in New England was the liberal use of what we may term "elastic group process." As the name implies, the object of group process is to accomplish the teaching of specific skills in addition to attending to a system of personal needs within the group. While the interviewers were in the training session, the focus of the discussion was on what had occurred while they visited sample families. It was interesting that in order to define their role, they raised questions about many of the evaluation instruments that were being used within sample Head Start classes. Discussions touched upon the need for testing Head Start children as well as the broad area of educating the disadvantaged child.

Throughout, an attempt was made to maintain sessions as informal forums for airing the problems encountered and exploring approaches to the situation that would produce a sharpening of their perception of interactions.

SECTION III - THE MISSISSIPPI INTERVIEWING PROJECT

Bolivar County, Mississippi, is the location of two Head Start programs involved in the 1966-1967 evaluation. The two Mississippi programs, CAP and ACBC, were located in the Delta region. Families are scattered across wide expanses of

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rich farmlands in primitive, substandard living conditions. The following is extracted from the narrative account of one community interviewer in this area and captures the realities of day-to-day existence in this county for the majority of E&R sample families:

It all began the first day of my interviewing in the Benoit district. There were several families in the same neighborhood who were in unlivable conditions--what I mean is poor housing, no water, half-dressed and dirty children. I'm sure the dirt came from lack of water, which they have to haul many miles away by tractor and trailer if the landowner grants permission to use them.

There is little or no work for farm families this season. Fathers can work if they are machine operators; no work for mothers only in some places....They flab weed cotton this season.

Most of the families depend on food stamps since commodity has been out. Families enjoy shopping with food stamps rather than receiving commodity. Although there are some that can't afford food stamps at the times they are due, due to the lack of work.

Many parents asked why they were not in the interview. I explained it to them, They wished they could have been, in hope they could get some aid. I hope conditions will change for the needy in the near future around here.

In this area where Head Start programs have taken a "first step" in getting parents involved in the education of their children, the Head Start program is much more than an educational venture. For a great majority of families in the county it has meant employment, clothes, food and shelter. However, given the existing conditions of the homes visited, it was obvious that there must be a massive attack in the War on Poverty aimed at homes in Mississippi where Head Start children live. Until services providing for physical, nutritional, and social welfare needs are injected into this area, it is doubtful that many parents will be able to address their energies or interests to maintaining a home environment that will augment, or at least, not wreck whatever gains the Head Start child has made.

The model for recruitment, training and on-the-job supervision of 12 mothers hired to do interviewing of the sample parents in the two Mississippi Head Start programs was similar to that developed in New England. However, the great distances between the families of Head Start children and the lack of any form of public transportation for interviewers necessitated that we alter the approach in several respects. It was arranged with the two programs that the team of 12 community interviewers ride on the buses or in the carpools in the mornings or afternoons when the children were being transported to and from centers.

Training and supervision of the field work of the 12 interviewers were the responsibility of the E&R research associate who lived in the region. It would have been extremely difficult to complete the Mississippi interviews given the design adopted without her involvement in the program. That she assumed the responsibility during evenings and weekends to offer individual help to the interviewers in interpreting what the instrument was trying to achieve was a major factor in "getting the job done." Because the interviewers lived in small towns spread over a two-county area, this necessitated that the trainer organize regional training sessions as well as driving interviewers to distant homes.

SECTION IV - AN ASSESSMENT OF WHAT WAS ACCOMPLISHED IN THE
NEW ENGLAND AND MISSISSIPPI PROJECT

In general, I believe the community interviewers in New England and Mississippi performed their jobs well. Observations of group sessions indicated that they showed a high degree of perception and insight into problems found within the families and could articulate alternative methods of dealing with them. The following, an excerpt from one of the taped training sessions for the New England interviewers, reflects this quite well:

CLAY: "All right, Ruth, What about your worse case?"

WARD: "This is Gene X. His mother was a million miles away during the entire interview. I knocked at the door. I told her who I was. I had called her on the phone earlier; and, she said, 'Come in,' and walked ahead of me. It was like a role-playing situation. . . . It was real hectic.

(Laughter from the group)

WARD: "She screamed continuously at her children; and, she said to me: 'Would you like a cup of coffee?' And before I had a chance to answer, she said, 'Why don't we sit down?' . . . Then, trying to interview her was so hard. She didn't look at me. She walked around and she hit one of the kids. 'I smiled sweetly and I talked to Gene about Head Start.' (Pause)

CLAY: "What was the mother doing?"

WARD: "I ignored Mother."
(Pause)

"Well. . . you know, I think the mother resented it when I was talking to him. Maybe she realized I was ignoring her and she said, 'How many more questions are you going to ask me?' Then she came right back and realized I was going to watch her.

CLAY: "Well, how did the interview go?"

WARD: "She answered my questions; but it just took her about 5 or 10 minutes to answer one because she wasn't paying attention to me.

ANOTHER COMMUNITY INTERVIEWER

#1: In other words, she was doing housework?"

WARD: "No, she was just sitting there. She had coffee, had a cigarette, played with the cat, screamed at the kids. . . It was beautiful watching her because I couldn't believe that a mother was actually acting this way. It was a good experience."

CLAY: "Ruth, do you have any idea why she responded to you like that or to the situation? . . . Had she ever been interviewed before?"

WARD: "No, she said she didn't even know the name of the Head Start social worker; and I interviewed about three mothers of the same class and they all knew. They had all seen dental people; they all had seen social workers; and, they all saw nurses. . . . She's never seen anybody."

ANOTHER COMMUNITY INTERVIEWER

#2: "Had she ever been to the class? Or from the interview do you have this information with you?"

WARD: "Yes, she took him to school. That's it! That's as far as she went, as far as the classroom is concerned. (Pauses to review interview form). . . To that question: 'If you've not been into the Head Start Class would you like to go?'"

COMMUNITY INTERVIEWER

#2: "Well, how did she answer?"

WARD: "I asked her that and she said, 'Um?' (Comments among the group) And I asked her if she had noticed any changes in Gene, and she said, 'Yes, he caused less trouble at home, which I appreciate.' And she said he speaks better, he has self-confidence, gets along better with other children....and he's able to do things on his own. From what I gathered though, her other two kids have been receiving help from the Mental Health Clinic. (Pause) . . .I tell you, those two are strictly working on their own 'cause she didn't help them one bit."

CLAY: "Do you think, Ruth, in terms of what you observed in the homes and her attitude during the interview, that she just didn't care about her children sincerely?"

WARD: "That she just didn't care. . .This was my first opinion. . .But, you know, now I don't know.She was a very nervous person. She's just a nervous wreck! . . .These are two active little boys who are all over on the chairs; tables, everything! It works on her nerves, I guess. . .She just needs help. I don't mean that she's a mental case or crazy, but needs to calm down, maybe a tranquillizer. I think Gene is her youngest. Maybe she could use a part-time job to get away from the house."

Again, within the comments of the Mississippi interviewers, it is possible to see similar insight into the problems facing the deprived families:

During my tour through the community while I was interviewing the families, I found families living in unbelievably bad-conditioned homes. Too many children in small towns, such as 16 children living in a three-room house and families who have to haul water many miles away from home are all around.

I feel that mothers would do an overall better job in managing their families if they had better facilities to do it with. Some homes we passed by were in fair condition and others weren't. I think this comes about where in one family there are more workers and less children. In others there seem to be less workers and much more children to provide for.

In some cases only the women are given something to do and the men and children are left out. If families in our country were given more work to do, I believe things would be in a much better condition. People around here don't even have beds for their children to sleep in, not nearly enough food for them to eat. . . It is a miracle how these little ones even exist.

While these 24 community interviewers were selected on the basis of their previous involvement in the Head Start program and their ability to relate well to others, the training staff felt that closer supervision and more intensive training could yield better outcomes in fulfilling the commitment our E&R Center has made involving non-professionals in meaningful, dignified and worthwhile ways within the Head Start evaluation and research activities.

Several of the questions raised by Head Start Directors and their staffs in New England and Mississippi touch upon providing for the wisest utilization of non-professionals within educational research activities, creating programs within local universities which offer college credits for non-professionals employed in various aspects of the poverty program, and exploring the effects of using non-professionals in jobs traditionally held to be the exclusive province of social workers, teachers and researchers. The exploration of many of these issues lies before our E&R Center within the coming year.